

THE
CLIMATE OF MADEIRA,

OR

THE ERRORS AND MISREPRESENTATIONS ON THIS SUBJECT CONTAINED
IN A RECENT WORK ON CLIMATE BY T. H. BURGESS, M.D.,

CONSIDERED IN

A Letter addressed to George Lund, M.D.,

BY

JAMES MACKENZIE BLOXAM, Esq.

[This letter has been printed in the form of a pamphlet, principally for private circulation; but a few copies have been left in the hands of the printer for publication.]*

The pamphlet contains some remarks on the science of medico-meteorology which are of general utility; but it is principally devoted to the object which the above title implies. The following extract, which forms the concluding section of the letter, will serve to convey some idea of its contents.]

I must now repeat Dr. Burgess's summing up, which deserves to be stereotyped. It will be found at page 204 of his work, as follows:—

“ CONCLUSION.

“ It results from the preceding statements, that much misconception prevails with respect to the efficacy of foreign climates in cases of pulmonary consumption; and however agreeable to the senses warm air, sunny skies, and luxuriant vegetation, may seem, they afford no proof of salubrity, nor of the beneficial effects of any climate.

* T. Richards, 37, Great Queen Street, London.

“Madeira, with all its sanitary fame, is no exception to this rule, as the meteorological observations of Drs. Heincken, Gourlay, and Mason, incontestably establish. Malta...”

To this I have only to add my own summing up, which is as follows :—

It appears to be Dr. Burgess's deliberate opinion, that the public and the medical profession are altogether in error on the climate theory, or practice ; that although English invalids and their physicians agree that the former derive material benefit from the climate of Madeira, yet, all are labouring alike under a pure delusion ; and that he, Dr. Burgess, sitting in his study in Half-moon-street, has only to cast his eyes over some columns of old meteorological observations in order to enunciate this incontestable conclusion. It is immaterial that the meteorological observers themselves, all of whom were physicians, and personally acquainted with the climate, differ in opinion from Dr. Burgess. It is immaterial that the observations were not made at the place in which the deluded invalids happened to reside ; and that, in the opinions of the observers themselves, their observations are applicable only to the place in which they were made. It is immaterial that some of the observations were made nearly sixty years ago, and the most recent nearly twenty years ago. It is immaterial that we are left in the dark as to the mode by which stated results were obtained. It is immaterial that the thermometer employed by one observer for registering the temperature in the shade was exposed to the influence of the sun during half the afternoons. It is immaterial that the position of the same observer's hygrometer was, apparently, about equally unsuitable. It is immaterial that we have very slender means of judging of the competency of the two other observers, or of the accuracy of their instruments. It is immaterial that some observations were made with a Daniell's hygrometer, and others with a Mason's hygrometer, that the observer who used the latter instrument did not know

how to compare its results with those of the former, and that Dr. Burgess writes as if he were utterly ignorant that there is any essential difference between them. Lastly, it is immaterial that Dr. Burgess reads and copies plain print exactly the reverse of what it expresses, with other variations, according to circumstances. All these preliminary difficulties Dr. Burgess can surmount, and then, as he thinks, arrive at a safe and incontestable conclusion by a mere glance; for, though he professes that no opinion has been hazarded without the support of positive data, yet he has not quoted one single fact from the meteorological tables and registers in question, and no one will imagine that he has really examined them, since to do so would have been obviously, and for several reasons, a mere waste of time on his part.

We have seen Dr. Burgess's definition in which he asserts that, the nearest approach to a perfect climate is that which approaches nearest to *equality* of temperature, with regard to its variations from day to day, from day to night, and from one season to another; and in which he treats all other considerations as, comparatively speaking, unimportant. We have seen Dr. Burgess's summing up in which he asserts that, the non-sanative effect of the climate of Madeira is incontestably established by the meteorological observations of Drs. Gourlay, Heineken, and Mason. And we have seen his prefatory assertion that, he has hazarded no opinions without positive data to enable his readers to judge whether his conclusions are warranted by the evidence. Nevertheless, Dr. Burgess's chapter, or section of a chapter, on the climate of Madeira, does not contain one single thermometric statement bearing on the question of how much the temperature varies from day to day, from day to night, or from one season to another.—No.—Not one! Dr. Burgess has not even given his readers the benefit of the remarks and inferences made by the above-named authors and deduced from their observations, which bear on these points. Scissors and paste could have accomplished that which Dr. Burgess's

pen has failed to do. The works of every one of the above-named authors contain unequivocal testimony to the equability of the temperature, and also to the sanative effect of this climate; every word of which Dr. Burgess has studiously kept back, whilst he has done his best to convey impressions of a directly opposite tendency by means of statements and quotations; hardly one of which is not a *palpable* misrepresentation of facts; and not a few are *literally* false, even down to so paltry a thing as a melancholy description of a burying-ground!

Another remarkable feature in Dr. Burgess's work is, that he seems to expect his readers to come to the same conclusion with himself; and that, too, in spite of the apparent inconsistency between his statements and his summing up; for after having done his best to vilify the climate of Madeira in every possible way, having extracted "reluctant" admissions from one source, that the climate is not altogether free from changes, which constitute there as well as elsewhere the exciting causes of pulmonary affections; having told us that the atmosphere is saturated with moisture during the greater part of the year; having made Dr. Mason assert that Madeira is no more to be relied on than any other place for certainty of fine weather, that it has *equally its annual variations of temperature*; and having represented the same author as complaining *bitterly* of the *cloudy sky*, the *high winds*, and the *variability of the climate*; and, with respect to the luxuriance of the vegetation, having told us only, that gloves and shoes become covered with various species of cryptogamous plants: after this description of the climate of Madeira, our author coolly sums up by announcing that Madeira is an example to the rule, that however *agreeable to the senses warm air, sunny skies, and luxuriant vegetation* may seem, they afford no proof of the salubrity nor of the beneficial effects of any climate! The author tells us, moreover, that this is the result of his preceding statements! Does Dr. Burgess mean to admit that, notwithstanding all he has told us to the contrary, Madeira really does rejoice in a warm air,

sunny sky, and luxuriant vegetation, calculated at least to charm the senses? After his prefatory flourish respecting no opinion being hazarded without the support of positive data, what are the facts with respect to Madeira, even upon Dr. Burgess's own representation? Are we to understand that Madeira is, or is not, warm and sunny? Are we to understand that mould upon boots is the vegetation referred to, in the author's summing up, as so peculiarly luxuriant and agreeable to the senses? Lastly, is it a fact, as Dr. Burgess alleges, that the land and sea breezes of this "blessed island" blow, each from one point of the compass only; and that the salubrity of the island mainly depends upon this strange phenomenon?

With respect to the luxuriance of the vegetation of Madeira, Dr. Burgess perhaps thinks that, since tradition and romance are on his side of the question, no positive data are required. This, however, is by no means in accordance with my views. So far as my knowledge extends, there is scarcely a spot to be found where there is moisture sufficient to support luxuriant vegetation, without the assistance of artificial irrigation. It is true that artificial irrigation is carried to a great extent; nevertheless the more general character of the surface of the country is dryness, barrenness, and absence of luxuriant vegetation. Even grass for horses and cows is brought down *daily* from the mountains; and in the summer, even on the mountains, the grass becomes so dry that a spark of fire will endanger the whole district. The whole island is of volcanic origin; its surface is either precipitous, or very much inclined, and the soil is of a porous nature. With the exception of a volcanic crater, and one or two other spots at distant parts of the island, none of which have I ever seen, I believe there are no hollows or basins capable of retaining water; and those to which I allude as the exceptions, do so only for limited periods. I have never seen a lake or even a pond. There are some yam-grounds which, I should suppose, must be injurious to the health of those persons who live on or close to them; but they are quite unworthy of further notice in this place.

But, supposing, for the sake of the argument, that we are now in possession of all the requisite meteorological data, Dr. Burgess's incontestable conclusion still depends upon his definition of what a perfect climate ought to be, and that rests upon his own bare conjecture, unsupported by any "positive data" whatever, notwithstanding his prefatory promises on this head. Now if Dr. Burgess were to set to work, and honestly endeavour to find positive data upon which to found this one essential link in the chain of his argument, what would he do? He would naturally begin by inquiring what climates are found, practically speaking, to produce the best effects. In investigating this question Madeira could not be overlooked, or put aside. He must inquire what effects, practically speaking, this climate actually has upon invalids. *Now, if Dr. Burgess had begun with this question, it is obvious, that his very first step would have concluded the whole argument!* And Dr. Burgess need have gone no further than Sir James Clarke's well-known work, in order to find the subject of the climate of Madeira entered upon, discussed, and disposed of, in a very few pages, much more to the purpose than in his own work, either with or without my elucidations.

Supposing Dr. Burgess to have begun at the right end of the argument, and to have arrived at its conclusion by mastering the first step, and supposing, simply for the sake of an example, that the conclusion is favorable to Madeira; then, if he thought it worth while to proceed beyond the real practical question, he might, as a second step, infer the following proposition,—either the air of Madeira is dry, or a dry air is not essential; and similarly of other disputed and disputable points. And if he had set himself to work to investigate such questions, he would, in my opinion, have set out in the legitimate paths of medicometeorological science; though he must have laboured long before he could have distinguished himself so effectually as he has done by following the bent of his own genius.

It is difficult to be certain of one's own motives ; but, I may safely say, my motives for writing this letter do not spring from any ill feelings toward Dr. Burgess personally. He is a total stranger to me. I first became acquainted with his name as the author of the work which I have criticised, and I know him only by what he has written there and elsewhere. My principal object is to undeceive those persons who have no suspicion that a work, on a subject of such vital importance, sanctioned by the name and title of an English physician, can be so utterly untruthful and unscientific. By such means the ignorant and the weak are of course easily misled ; but even well-informed persons read such works without giving themselves the trouble to sift the arguments ; and though they may not be fully convinced, yet they too often allow their opinions to be influenced. I resorted to Madeira for the benefit of my health, and have continued to reside there with no other object. If I have any selfish interest in its sanitary fame, it is, certainly, to deery it ; with a view to the reduction of house-rent and housekeeping expenses, which have been greatly raised by the influx of English visitors.

We have a right to expect that alleged quotations shall be true so far as they go : but it is contrary to experience to assume that authors in general quote fairly as against themselves. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to epitomise with perfect fairness ; and it is but natural that one should be a little blind to the force of arguments which are opposed to one's own views. If, unfortunately, I have made any important slips of this nature, they will most fairly expose me to criticism and correction ; but not to a charge of dishonesty, unless by their nature, or by their frequent repetition, they sustain the charge of wilfulness. As I claim it for myself, so I would allow to Dr. Burgess the full benefit of these last remarks ; and my readers will form their own opinions of the character of Dr. Burgess's repeated misrepresentations, and whether they call for criticism and correction alone.

The question of climate for invalids is a very complicated one, which I cannot undertake to unravel. I may, however, state my opinion, that an invalid should regard his removal to a more suitable climate as simply placing him in more favourable circumstances. Some unfortunate invalids may be so far beyond human aid, as to derive no material benefit from such a change. Others may succeed in materially prolonging their lives, and alleviating their suffering. And still a third class will find that the turning-point between gradually declining and gradually recovering, depends upon this one additional favourable circumstance. Let those invalids who would be of this last class, if they have it in their power, procure for themselves this important advantage BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE. Let them take the best practical medical advice within their power on this point (the best is but fallible). And let them not trust too much to climate alone, but place themselves also under safe medical advisers—a most important point, for the decision of which I must leave them to their own discretion.

Yours very sincerely,

J. M. BLOXAM.